

## **“Giving Up Death”**

April 16, 2017

*Giving It Up* series – Easter Sunday

We’ve gathered. We’ve heard Peter’s sermon from Acts where he shares with the Gentiles. This is good news for everyone - for all of us! Earlier we heard of Mary coming in the dark to do what needs to be done. She’s steeped in death. She’s surrounded by it as she comes to the tomb and inhales the aroma of the spices and oils she brings to prepare Jesus’ body. She stops in the garden when she sees the stone rolled away from the hole, runs back to tell the others this seemingly tragic news, and then comes back and weeps. She responds to the angels and even to the One who asks her why she cries so hard.

It’s not a game that Jesus plays. It’s not a “shock and awe” trick. Mary Magdalene was one of his closest followers. Yes, I know what some people say about her, but what we know is that Jesus healed her. That’s the connection. She’s been healed and freed from demons that bound her, and she comes to the garden after having been a part of Jesus’ circle of support.

The garden is where it all began that morning. But it doesn’t end there. Because Mary goes back and tells the others that giving up death is a real thing. Yes, death is real. We know that. I’ve officiated at many funerals over the past 16 years. You’ve experienced death of people you love. I’ve stood beside the grave of both grandmothers (my grandfathers died before I was born). I’ve been by the side of my friend as she lost her mom earlier this year, stood beside the phone waiting to hear about surgeries of dear ones and a heart transplant of a dear friend. We know that death is real. It was real when Jesus died.

And yet Mary encounters this good news that can’t be contained. Even Jesus tells her to go and tell others about it because it changes the way we think about death, talk about death, and even the way we face death. Friends, the resurrection is God’s offer of hope. It’s God’s promise that no matter how bleak it seems, no matter how dark it gets, no matter what, there is still hope because God offers life that is more than this life.

Now all that being said, there’s also work to do. It’s fine to celebrate Easter. We need to celebrate, but there’s a push for us to act. If we believe in resurrection, in God who works for life and hope, in Christ whose death was not in vain, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, then we have to be about those things.

If we believe that death doesn’t win, that love wins every time, that we’re truly called to be a part of the work that God is doing, then let’s get to it - because from

where I stand, the message of resurrection isn't always clear. It's not always getting out there. Sometimes it seems that we're Good Friday people rather than Easter people. We haven't let the good news go out!

Sometimes we're content to hold it close and keep it close and cherish it, and maybe we can do that for a moment, but even Jesus tells Mary to go and tell others that it's real. She doesn't get to stay in the garden with him forever.

Her message is the same one that Jesus was preaching and teaching and living the whole time. You really can give up death. You don't have to let it have such a hold on you. You don't have to be afraid. You don't have to let it get you down. You can claim life that is really life - eternal life, hope, peace, joy, resurrection! And you must share it!

I'm convinced that Jesus wasn't telling Mary to go and tell others just so that they'd believe in his resurrection. I think that he wanted his resurrection to point her, his disciples who remained, the early church, and all who would come after that - including us - this is about how we live - not just on one day of the year, but every day of the year!

This is about how we live for life and about how we work for justice for all people. It's about how love really can and does conquer hate when we live in love. It's about how death is real, but the power of death is no match for the gift of hope of life and new life. Theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg said, "the evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live."

How many of you know that more than a million people watched a baby giraffe born yesterday? April the giraffe gave birth to a boy calf at an Animal Adventure Park in New York. And in the midst of all that's on the news, the park live-streamed the birth to an audience that was captivated and had been captivated for months. New life emerging was front-page news even as we live with the reality of bombs and new weapons and people in devastating circumstances around the world.

And I confess that the reality of this Holy Week hit me hard with continued unrest in Syria and Afghanistan, images of refugees who seek safety, poverty in our community, the reality of abuse and addiction, grief, and other personal situations that make it hard to see resurrection. Just because Easter comes doesn't mean that the world is bright and wonderful.

So we celebrate Jesus' resurrection, but I wonder how easy it is for us to believe that new life is really possible in the midst of everything we see. There are moments when I wonder if things will get better - if violence will ever end, if poverty will always

be a reality, what future my kids will face, if technology will ultimately help us, if we'll decide to make loving one another our goal instead of hate, if the church will survive and truly be a place where all are welcome because Jesus calls us to it.

And it's hard to believe - to believe that in the midst of so much death, despair, and suffering - that life and love have power to make a difference. But in the end I think they do. I see light in little Luke's eyes. You were blessed by his joy this morning, too. I feel love from people around me. I sense peace even in the midst of death.

And I choose to believe that even though it sometimes seems like hate and death and despair are too powerful, I know they're not. Because Mary and everyone who heard the news that Jesus wasn't in the tomb anymore knew that it changed the game. Thank God they believed that it changed the game because we wouldn't be here without them!

It meant that everything that Jesus said was true. And it meant that everything he did was a part of giving up death and seeking life instead. And it still means that for us. His truth lives in us, and it will never lose its power as long as people are seeking to be more like him.

Friends, this is personal. I hope that this Easter moves us. This is not just the day we gather to celebrate, but this is personal. It was personal for Mary to meet Jesus in the garden and go back and tell others about it. It was personal for Peter and John to hear this amazing news and run to the place where Jesus' body lay - and wonder if what he said is true.

### ***SHOW "The Risen Way"***

Even though you and I aren't in the garden or running to the tomb, this is personal. When we witnessed baptism this morning, when we celebrated with Luke and his family, we became part of what it means to live with hope and joy because of resurrection. Back in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, St. Basil said, "Baptism implants in us the seed of resurrection." Baptism brings us into the Easter story. Baptism reminds us that God's love is always there.

When we leave here and tell someone, "I went to church today," what difference will it make? Are you willing to be a part of giving up death - or at least the power of death? Are you willing to take on the possibility of resurrection - that loving others matters and life - every moment of it - matters?

Giving up death is a step we take when we realize that we can have relationship with God through Christ. We're not defined by the limits of this earthly life, or the fear of death, or the past that follows us, or the present if we feel alone, hopeless, or despairing. Giving up death means that heaven and earth come together, and God is with us to help us through the times death feels too powerful.

Perhaps God is speaking to your heart today. Maybe you've been thinking about what it means to have a new beginning in Jesus Christ. God is calling each of us, as we hear the resurrection story, to trust in Jesus to overcome the worst – even death – with the promise of hope and new life. If you want to make that commitment today, if you need to reclaim that commitment today, this is the time to do it.

It's a new day. It's a day to give up death and take on resurrection and new life. He is risen. Thanks be to God! Amen.